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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000202

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/25/2019  
TAGS: PREL MOPS KPKO SO ET  
SUBJECT: SOMALIA: ASWJ SEEKING US HELP TO DEFEAT AL-SHABAAB  
(S/NF)

Classified By: AMBASSADOR DONALD YAMAMOTO. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

**¶1.** (S/NF) Summary. Somali Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a (ASWJ) coordinator, and Dubai based businessman from the Darood clan, Mahdi Dahir Sheikh Nur told PolOff on January 24 that ASWJ would fight until al-Shabaab was "defeated and dead," and he said ASWJ was mobilizing to expand its operations. Mahdi said ASWJ was preparing to attack Merka, El Bur, and Dusa Mareb in the near future, and was considering a move into Mogadishu. He revealed that ASWJ associated militias were receiving ammunition and intelligence from the Ethiopian military, as well as information from Somaliland and Puntland. He also stated that the Ugandan and Kenyan governments were considering providing assistance to ASWJ. Mahdi assessed the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to be irrelevant, although his movement was taking actions behind the scenes to shape the formation of the expanded TFG parliament in their favor. He also did not trust Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia Djibouti (ARS/Djibouti) head Sheikh Sharif, and said ASWJ leaders refused even to talk to Sharif. Mahdi asked outright for financial and military assistance from Washington, pledging to defeat al-Shabaab with American help. End Summary.

ASWJ Mobilizing, Taking the Fight to Al-Shabaab

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**¶2.** (S/NF) Mahdi, who had just flown to Addis Ababa from Guriel a few days prior to the meeting with PolOff, explained that ASWJ, particularly after the January 11 fighting around Guriel, was in the process of mobilizing and equipping an army to destroy al-Shabaab. He said ASWJ had access to unlimited manpower, but was constrained by a lack of resources, specifically arms and ammunition. He noted that while the Guriel fighting had gone well, there were several points where the fighters had to withdraw from a lack of ammunition, and he said ASWJ's main source of weapons was from dead al-Shabaab fighters. He also said the group was having difficulty obtaining proper medical care for its wounded fighters.

**¶3.** (S/NF) During the Guriel fighting, ASWJ feinted a withdrawal through the town to lure al-Shabaab into an ambush where waiting fighters attacked their pursuers from all sides, Mahdi said. He added that al-Shabaab "were cowards," and that they only cared about saving their technicals, leaving fighters to die. Mahdi noted the list of al-Shabaab fighters who were killed in the fighting, and he added that al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Aw-Mohammed Godani had been severely wounded in the stomach.

## ASWJ's Next Targets

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**¶4.** (S/NF) Mahdi said ASWJ was making plans to capture the port of Merka next to be followed by El Bur and Dusa Mareb. He said no one clan dominates the Merka area, and that taking the port would not be too difficult once ASWJ had sufficient weapons and ammunition. He said the El Bur airstrip was used by Eritrea to fly weapons to the extremists and that it must be stopped. ASWJ was also preparing to expel al-Shabaab from Dusa Mareb. Mahdi emphasized that the backbone of the Wahhabi extremists was in Galguduud, and therefore, they must be defeated there first.

**¶5.** (S/NF) When queried whether ASWJ was considering moving into Mogadishu, Mahdi responded that such an operation was under consideration by ASWJ leaders. He said ASWJ was looking at moving into three districts in Mogadishu: Hodan, Hawlwadaag, and Wardhigley. Their plan was to have ASWJ fighters infiltrate those neighborhoods wearing black masks disguised as al-Shabaab fighters to use the element of surprise. He did not think that this operation would occur in the immediate future with priority being given to the other targets he identified.

## ASWJ Receiving Support from Ethiopia

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**¶6.** (S/NF) Mahdi explained that after ASWJ's initial successes, they established contact with the Ethiopian government, and specifically, the Ethiopian National Defense

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Force (ENDF). Mahdi said he met with ENDF Chief of Defense General Samora in mid-January to discuss potential Ethiopian military support. Mahdi said Samora congratulated him on being the first group in Somalia to defeat al-Shabaab, and Samora wanted to know what ASWJ's plan was going forward. Mahdi said he asked Samora to allow the ENDF to conduct joint operations with ASWJ forces, but Samora refused noting that he intended to have all Ethiopian military forces out of Somalia very soon. Instead Samora agreed to provide whatever other support he could, including ammunition and intelligence, both of which Mahdi confirmed ASWJ had received since the Samora meeting. He stressed, however, that the ammunition was not enough and he needed more. Mahdi noted that in one instance ENDF forces, apparently located within earshot of the fighting, went to Gurriel and observed for several hours before withdrawing without engaging al-Shabaab. Mahdi also said he had received requests from ASWJ field commanders for Ethiopian fire support, but the ENDF refused to join the fighting.

## Somaliland and Puntland Assisting ASWJ

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**¶7.** (S/NF) ASWJ was also working closely with the Somaliland and Puntland governments who were providing intelligence to ASWJ field commanders, Mahdi said. He noted that both governments understood that if Galguduud fell to the extremists, Puntland and Somaliland were next. Mahdi stated he had recently briefed the new Puntland President in person in Galcaio, and said the Somaliland Interior Minister was in regular direct contact with ASWJ commanders by telephone.

## Kenyan and Ugandan Governments in Contact with ASWJ

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**¶8.** (S/NF) Mahdi said the Kenyan security service was in contact with ASWJ people in Nairobi, and that the Kenyan government was exploring ways to assist them. He also said an ASWJ delegation had recently met with the Ugandan government as well as with Ugandan AMISOM military commanders in Mogadishu, and that the initial response from Kampala was favorable.

"The TFG is Irrelevant..."

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¶9. (S/NF) On the political front, Mahdi insisted the TFG was irrelevant, noting that the current negotiations in Djibouti were badly organized, and he predicted that a merger between the TFG and ARS/Djibouti could never work. He commented that ASWJ had declined to join the political process, but he admitted that ASWJ had yet to make any decisions regarding the TFG itself. Nevertheless, he said ASWJ was attempting to shape the list of the 200 ARS/Djibouti members to be added to the TFG parliament to ensure that there were as few extremists on the list as possible. He also said he would prefer that the next TFG prime minister come from ASWJ.

"...and Sheikh Sharif is Little Different than Shabaab"

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¶10. (S/NF) But Mahdi was clear that Sheikh Sharif could not be trusted. He said Sharif had repeatedly reached out to ASWJ leaders, but that ASWJ had refused to talk with him. Mahdi stated that Sharif had yet to make any statements regarding al-Shabaab desecration of Sunni graves, and insisted that Sharif's refusal to condemn the attacks showed his true allegiance is to the extremists. He said if things do not work out for Sharif, then Sharif would simply return to Asmara. Mahdi predicted that if Sharif became TFG president, then the fighting in Somalia would increase. Mahdi was also concerned that al-Shabaab's defeat by ASWJ would increase Sharif's influence and power, and Mahdi did not have a clear idea of how to confront that possibility.

A Plea for Assistance from Washington

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¶11. (S/NF) After explaining ASWJ's activities, Mahdi queried what the United States was going to do to assist ASWJ in defeating al-Shabaab. He asked whether Washington would

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"watch or act." Mahdi said the group's most pressing needs were for money, small arms, and ammunition. He insisted that with American help, al-Shabaab would be defeated. However, Mahdi wanted to continue direct contact with the American government, and he specifically noted that in the future he did not want the Ethiopian government to act as an interlocutor between his group and the United States. PolOff thanked Mahdi for the frank discussion and promised only to relay Mahdi's message to Washington.

Comment

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¶12. (S/NF) Although Mahdi insisted that ASWJ was apolitical, the actions he said his group were taking show that at the very least the movement is attempting to shape the political environment, and therefore, cannot be considered to be outside the political realm. Informed Somalis associated with the TFG in Addis Ababa have begun raising concerns that if ARS leaders who ASWJ considers to be the hardline extremists become a significant power within a TFG/ARS unity government, then ASWJ will quickly come to view the unity government as the enemy. The Ethiopian government probably would look favorably on a relationship between Washington and ASWJ as it was Abdetta Dribssa, the Ethiopian government's special envoy to Somalia now returned from Mogadishu, who introduced Mahdi to PolOff. End Comment.

YAMAMOTO